DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 079 779 CS 500 345

AUTHOR Campbell, Karlyn Kohrs
TITLE Criticism: Ephemeral and Enduring.
PUB DATE Apr 73
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Speech Assn. (Minneapolis, April, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Analytical Criticism; Communication (Thought Transfer); Cultural Context; *Literature Reviews; *Persuasive Discourse; *Rhetoric; *Rhetorical Criticism

ABSTRACT

In spite of the material seeking to define rhetoric and approaches to its study, few attempts have been made to stipulate qualities of "rhetorical acts meriting critical attention" or critical outcomes that serve social or professional functions. Rhetorical criticism, to be useful, must perform a unique function for society as well as for the speech communication discipline. Some distinction must be made between those critical acts designed for a social function and those intended to contribute to rhetorical theory. The foundation of rhetorical theory lies in Herbert Wichelns' belief that rhetorical criticism, rather than being concerned with permanence, beauty, or effects as such, regards rhetorical acts as symbolic acts; the purpose of rhetorical criticism is to discover and explain the symbolic processes available to human beings as revealed in these acts. (RN)

FILMED FROM BEST AVAILABLE COPY

ED 079779

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Criticism: Ephemeral and Enduring

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell
Associate Professor of Rhetoric
Department of English,
General Literature and
Rhetoric
State University of New York
at Binghamton

CS 500 345

In 1970, addressing the prospect of rhetoric, Karl Wallace followed numerous predecessors in lamenting the state of criticism. He wrote: "It seems to be generally agreed among rhetoricians that one of their signal failures in the last 70 years is the failure to produce in any significant numbers practicing critics of public discourse."[1] I would add that not only have we failed to produce a significant body of criticism, but we have failed to fulfill both our social and professional functions.[2] I shall argue that these failures can be traced to the ways in which the objects and objectives of criticism have been defined and to a confusion between critical acts serving social functions and critical acts capable of making significant contributions to rhetorical theory.

Despite numerous essays defining rhetoric, explicating methodology, and arguing the merits of various critical perspectives, there have been few systematic attempts either to define those qualities and characteristics of rhetorical acts meriting critical attention or to stipulate critical outcomes that serve social or professional functions.[3] The traditional answer, that critics must describe, analyze, interpret, and evaluate, is inadequate because it fails to indicate <u>what</u> should be described, analyzed, interpreted, and evaluated and <u>to what end</u>.[4] Other answers suggesting the contributions criticism may make to historical or empirical research are also inadequate.[5] If criticism is to

be legitimized, it must have intrinsic worth; it must perform a unique function for society and for our discipline.

The historical burden under which rhetorical criticism labors is the definition of the objects and objectives of critical inquiry enunciated by Herbert Wichelns and enacted in what Edwin Black labelled "neo-Aristotelian" methodology. Wichelns' influential statement bears repeating:

> /Rhetorical criticism/ is not concerned with permanence nor yet with beauty. It is concerned with effect. It regards a speech as a communication to a specific audience, and holds its business to be the analysis and appreciation of the orator's method of imparting his ideas to his hearers.[6]

This definition excludes enduring masterpieces, literary works, genres or movements, and discourses that persuade through methods other than by imparting ideas. Methodologically, it excludes considerations of truth, long-term effects, aesthetic quality, and most significantly, appraisal and evaluation of the ends being advocated. The task of the rhetorical critic is to examine individual oral works from a single source in relation to an immediate audience and explain their success in producing instrumental effects through imparting ideas. It is as if the fledgling critic were asked to take an oath that might read something like this:

> I do solemnly swear to devote all my efforts to explaining the persuasive effects of advertisers, politicians, and propagandists. I promise, against all my natural proclivities, to be fascinated by the dull, garrulous, repetitive pronouncements on head-

aches, body odors, foreign aid, welfare, anti-communism, anti-imperialism, anti-pollution, and the like. Should a metaphor appear, I promise to ignore it. Should a speech endure, I promise to neglect it. All this I do solemnly swear so that a separate discipline of speech communication shall not perish from the earth.

Of course, I overstate the case. Nevertheless, despite emendations legitimizing the criticism of written rhetoric,[7] movements,[8] and exhortative acts,[9] the objects of critical inquiry still remain, to use Ernest Wrage's apt phrase, "fugitive literature."[10] Their importance, like their effects, is specific, instrumental, and immediate--in a word, ephemeral.

A critical dilemma results. On the one hand, the analysis and evaluation of ephemeral, contemporary, rhetorical acts serves a vital function for society. On the other hand, like the acts themselves, the criticism of them, particularly as mandated by Wichelns and developed in neo-Aristotelian methodology, is itself ephemeral, i.e., without enduring historical or rhetorical significance.[11] It should come as no surprise, then, that the Speech Communication Association has not given an award to a critical work fulfilling Wichelns' definition or that critics do not write significant numbers of ephemeral critiques explaining the instrumental effects of ephemeral events.

If this situation is to change, a distinction must be

made between critical acts designed to perform a social function and those intended to make enduring contributions to rhetorical theory. Regarding social criticism, I have little quarrel with Wichelns' definition of the objects of critical inquiry, especially when expanded to include written and exhortative rhetoric and persuasive campaigns.[12] But professional journals are not the appropriate vehicles nor are professional colleagues the appropriate audience. The social criticism of ephemeral, contemporary events belongs in the mass media, where much of it now appears, and the audience it needs to reach is the general public. It would be preferable if this criticism were written by trained rhetorical critics rather than by journalists who vary widely in their critical skills. Methodologically, however, the strict application of neo-Aristotelian procedures must be abandoned. The social function of criticism is to raise issues and encourage public discussion. This requires that critics appraise both the means used in and the ends advocated by rhetorical acts and the immediate and long-range effects of both.[13] Social critics of public discourse need professional encouragement to follow the precedents set by prominent historians, economists, political scientists, and others who critique specific proposals and policies of particular administrations or interest groups in the mass media. However, very little, if any, of this social criticism will have enduring value. Social critics nearly always produce statements that are bound to particular times, issues, and situations. In fact, social criticism may be defined as

criticism evaluating the ways in which issues are formulated, policies justified, and the effects of both on society at a particular historical moment. Such social criticism is absolutely vital, but as social criticism it will not be enduring; its importance and its functions are immediate and ephemeral.[14]

Ironically, a definition of the acts meriting critical inquiry is only tangentially relevant to the second type of criticism directed to colleagues through professional publications. This "academic" or "professional" criticism can make an enduring contribution to the discipline whether or not the acts it examines are trivial ephemera or enduring masterpieces, oral or written, argumentative or exhortative, aesthetic or persuasive, single events or movements, confrontations or rational discussions, verbal or non-verbal. What must be specified are the factors that constitute critical excellence and the critical outcomes or objectives that contribute to rhetorical theory. At this level, criticism and theory are indistinguishable.

The most economic and forceful method for specifying significant outcomes and describing critical excellence is the examination of masterpieces or touchstones of criticism. Consider with me Kenneth Burke's essay on Mein Kampf,[15] Richard Hofstadter's essay on the paranoid style in American politics,[16] and Edwin Black's critiques of the Coatesville Address[17] and of the "cancer of communism" metaphor in the rhetoric of the Radical Right.[18] None of the rhetorical acts criticized is self-evidently a masterpiece. Mein

Kampf is not read for its style which is execrable;[19] rather its significance arises out of the socio-historical catastrophe into which it may give insight. Similarly, the political discourses examined by Hofstadter and Black are quite undistinguished. Finally, whatever the intrinsic merits of the Coatesville Address, it had been forgotten.[20] But in the hands of these critics, the enduring rhetorical significance of these acts becomes evident, and each critique makes an enduring contribution to rhetorical theory. In the hands of Burke, Mein Kampf becomes an illustration through which the reader experiences and understands the processes of symbolically transforming the mythic principles of one universe of thought, in this case, Christianity, into a potent ideology, in this case, Nazism. In the hands of Hofstadter, the apparently unrelated statements of the anti-Masonic movement, the anti-Catholic movement, and the discourses of Joseph McCarthy, among others, are linked to reveal a powerful genre of rhetoric unified by substantive/stylistic features that transcend particular periods or issues.[21] In the hands of Black, an explication of the ideas and attitudes of the Radical Right synthesized or condensed in the "cancer of communism" metaphor reveals the potential ideological force of any metaphor, and his treatment of the Coatesville Address discloses a process by which the rights and wrongs of a particular event and the issues of a particular historical moment are transcended symbolically to form an enduring moral statement. In each case, what we learn about the specific rhetorical acts is secondary; they become

illustrations or means through which the reader apprehends the nature of symbolic processes themselves. And that, in brief, is the function of criticism for the discipline.

The enduring contributions of criticism to rhetorical theory are the discovery of forms that permit and evoke participation,[22] of processes that transcend argumentative controversies and immediate situations,[23] of transformations that restructure perceptions and create new perspectives,[24] of syntheses of substantive/stylistic stratagems that form genres of rhetoric,[25] and of archetypal forms of interaction.[26] Let me emphasize that each of these contributions is a direct result of critical insight; the symbolic processes are not self-evident in the rhetorical acts themselves. The objects and objectives of this second form of rhetorical criticism may be expressed in a paraphrase of Wichelns' familiar statement:

> Rhetorical criticism is not concerned with permanence or with beauty or with effects as such. It regards rhetorical acts as symbolic acts and holds its business to be the discovery and explication of the symbolic processes available to human beings as revealed and illustrated in these acts.

Such criticism is, in my opinion, the very foundation of rhetorical theory.

The obvious question that remains concerns the relationship between these two types of criticism. Although the preceding discussion treats them as discrete forms, they

represent two strong tendencies in criticism that are never entirely separated. What I have termed "academic" or "professional" criticism has long-range cultural implications and is frequently motivated, at least in part, by a desire to understand symbolic processes with important social consequences.[27] At its best, social criticism is an application of the concepts developed in academic criticism which tests, refines, and elaborates symbolic forms and processes.[28] In some cases, social criticism suggests directions for academic criticism by pointing to areas in which fundamental symbolic processes exist or may be most evident.[29] Despite these interrelationships, however, I believe that the distinctions between these two forms of criticism are salient and that the confusion between the social and professional functions of criticism is a theoretical and pedagogical barrier to the development of this area of our discipline.

These, then, are the two direction in which I believe rhetorical criticism should go. But I am not sanguine about their prospects, for what disturbs me most is that I am not sure our discipline values rhetorical criticism at all. What, for example, is the critic to make of Lloyd Bitzer's statement that "In the best of all possible worlds, there would be communication, perhaps, but no rhetoric . . ."?[30] I interpret this as expressing a distrust of symbolic processes and a distaste for man as symbol-user and abuser. If these attitudes are characteristic, it is doubtful that rhetorical criticism will ever serve a vital function for society or make a significant contribution to our discipline.

Footnotes

[1]"The Fundamentals of Rhetoric," The Prospect of Rhetoric ed. Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 17.

[2]Wayne Booth argues this point strongly in "The Scope of Rhetoric Today," Ibid. See particularly pp. 113-114.

[3]The most systematic effort is Edwin Black, Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method (New York: Macmillan, 1965). Other efforts include Albert J. Croft, "The Functions of Rhetorical Criticism," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 42 (October 1956), pp. 283-291; Walter R. Fisher, "Method in Rhetorical Criticism," Southern Speech Journal, 35 (Winter 1969), pp. 101-109; Loren D. Reid, "The Perils of Rhetorical Criticism," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 30 (December 1944), pp. 416-422.

[4]These critical functions are most fully developed by Robert Cathcart, Post Communication: Criticism and Evaluation (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966). The question of critical objectives is treated via discussion of the standards by which speeches may be evaluated, pp. 89-111.

[5]Marie Hochmuth Nichols, Rhetoric and Criticism (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 19-33; John Waite Bowers, "The Pre-Scientific Function of Rhetorical Criticism," Essays on Rhetorical Criticism ed. Thomas R. Nilsen (New York: Random House, 1968), pp. 126-145.

[6]"The Literary Criticism of Oratory," Speech Criticism: Methods and Materials ed. William A. Linsley (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown, 1963), p. 32.

[7]A. Craig Baird, Rhetoric: A Philosophical Inquiry (New York: Ronald Press, 1965), pp. 5-10; Donald C. Bryant, "Rhetoric: Its Function and Its Scope," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 39 (December 1963), p. 407; Black, pp. 10-11.

[8]Ernest J. Wrage, "Public Address: A Study in Social and Intellectual History," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 33 (December 1947), pp. 451-457; Leland M. Griffin, "The Rhetoric of Historical Movements," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 38 (April 1952), pp. 184-188.

[9]Black, pp. 138-147.

[10]Wrage, p. 101.

[11]I take it as self-evident that a methodology incapable of appraising the ends of discourse or of evaluating long-term effects cannot have enduring historical value (see Black, pp. 60-78) and that a methodology that confines itself to explaining immediate, instrumental effects cannot have enduring rhetorical significance unless rhetoric is to be defined as the art of successful manipulation.

[12]A strong argument can be made for expanding the scope of the objects of social criticism to include a wide variety of acts disseminated through all media. See, for example, Booth, op. cit.

[13]This position is central to the argument about criticisms of Nixon's Vietnamization Address. See Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "'Conventional Wisdom--Traditional Form': A Rejoinder," and Forbes I. Hill, "Reply to Professor Campbell," Quarterly

Journal of Speech, 58 (December 1972), pp. 451-460.

[14]The criticisms found in Wayne Brockriede and Robert L. Scott, Moments in the Rhetoric of the Cold War (New York: Random House, 1970), Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, Critiques of Contemporary Rhetoric (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1972), and Robert L. Scott and Wayne Brockriede, The Rhetoric of Black Power (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) illustrate the importance and the transcience of works of social criticism.

[15]"The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle,'" Philosophy of Literary Form (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 191-220.

[16]The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), pp. 3-40.

[17]Rhetorical Criticism, pp. 78-90.

[18]"The Second Persona," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 56 (April 1970), pp. 109-119.

[19]See translator's note, Adolph Hitler, Mein Kampf, Vols. I and II, trans. Ralph Mannheim (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1943).

[20]Black, Rhetorical Criticism, p. 82.

[21]Hofstadter describes the substantive/stylistic synthesis as follows: "It is important to bear in mind, however, that while any system of beliefs can be espoused in the paranoid style, there are certain beliefs which seem to be espoused almost entirely in this way." (footnote 2, p. 5)

[22]John Rathbun argues this point of view and applies it to the rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr., in "The Problem of Judgment and Effect in Historical Criticism: A Proposed Solution," Western Speech, 33 (Summer 1969), pp. 146-159. Other examples include Richard B. Gregg, "The Ego-Function of the Rhetoric of Protest," Philosophy & Rhetoric, 4 (Spring 1971), pp. 71-91, and Michael Osborn, "Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric: The Light-Dark Family," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 53 (April 1967), pp. 115-126.

[23]See, for example, Black's treatment of Newman's Apologia and Plato's dialogues in Rhetorical Criticism, pp. 151-157.

[24]See particularly Kenneth Burke's treatment of the relation between theology and logology in The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 1-42. An attempt to take this critical approach is made in Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "The Rhetoric of Radical Black Nationalism: A Case Study in Self-Conscious Criticism," Central States Speech Journal, 22 (Fall 1971), pp. 151-160.

[25]Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 59 (February 1973), pp. 74-86.

[26]Theodore Otto Windt, Jr., "The Diatribe: Last Resort for Protest," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 58 (February 1972), pp. 1-14.

[27]This is evident in the critical touchstones discussed. Burke is concerned to understand the "snake oil" of one of

the most powerful medicine men of the 20th Century; Black remarks that the continued existence of a profound racial problem gives contemporary force to Chapman's words; both Hofstadter and Black illuminate the sorts of rhetoric that result in "witch-hunting" activities.

[28]Robert L. Scott's treatment of Nixon's First Inaugural Address is illustrative. His criticism is a skillful application and elaboration of the role of metaphor in a rhetorical act. (See "Rhetoric That Postures: An Intrinsic Reading of Richard M. Nixon's Inaugural Address," Western Speech, 34 (Winter 1970), pp. 46-52.)

[29]One example of this process is Scott and Brockriede's analysis of Hubert Humphrey's NAACP Convention speech. Their view of "Black Power" as a powerful and ambiguous phrase that calls for rhetorical definition suggests a further critical statement exploring the rhetorical significance of the symbolic process of definition itself. (See "Hubert Humphrey Faces the Black Power Issue," The Rhetoric of Black Power, pp. 74-83.)

[30]Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy & Rhetoric, 1 (January 1968), p. 13.